

Altruism as a Function of Age and Deprivation: An Interactional Study

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The research was planned to investigate the independent as well as interactional effects of age and deprivation on altruism. For this, a 3 × 3 bivariate classification of the sample was made. The ages of the participants was divided into young (over 20 – 40 years), middle (over 40 – 60 years) and old (over 60 – 80 years). Deprivation was categorized on the basis of the scores of the subjects on Deprivation Scale into three–high deprived (HD), medium deprived (MD) and low deprived (LD), and accordingly in each of nine subgroups 40 male urban employees (working/retired) of government or semi government organizations were selected. All the selected subjects were individually interviewed with Altruism Scale. A bivariate analysis of the data revealed that as age and deprivation increase altruism also increases. However, interaction of age X deprivation does not make any significant difference in altruism.

Keywords: Altruism, age, deprivation.

August Comte, a French philosopher and sociologist, first introduced the term, 'altruism'. Probably, he came to adopt the term from the Italian word, 'altrui'. For Comte, altruism meant an unselfish regard for the welfare of others. According to Bryan and London (1970), altruistic behaviour refers to those behaviours which are intended to benefit another but which appears to have a high cost to the actor with little possibility of material or social reward. Altruism is generally defined as any form of voluntary act intended to favour another without expectations of rewards (Smith & Mackie, 2000). It refers to a kind of selfless help, which is based on pure desire to help others (Aranson, Wilson, Akert & Fehr, 2004). Examples of altruistic behaviour cover a wide range including expression of support and sympathy, doing special favours to others, acts of generosity, active defence of the rights of deprived, engagement in voluntary activities for the mentally and physically handicapped and martyrdom. It is a desire to help others which expresses itself in many ways through sympathy, philanthropy, etc. A person with strong altruistic want has affection and concern for others and is usually contrasted with the selfish person. According to Hamilton (1978), altruistic behaviour which helps only the recipient can be

distinguished from other types of intra specific social interactions, for example, cooperative behaviour which helps both parties, selfish behaviour which helps the donor only, and spiteful behaviour in which both parties lose. Altruistic behaviour involves helping, sometimes, even taking great risks even though the act is not likely to be rewarded, recognized or even appreciated. Thus, an altruistic act is selfless. The same has been stressed by Walster and Piliavin (1972) who say that "altruism is [a] very special form of helping behaviour that is voluntary, costly to the altruist and motivated by something other than the expected one of material or social reward". Altruism then is selfless rather than selfish. Yarrow Scott and Walter (1973) point out that altruism is not a specific form of behaviour rather it includes a diversity of responses such as helping, sharing, rescuing, sympathizing and undoubtedly more.

The term, deprivation, has stemmed from the verb, 'to deprive', which means to dispossess or strip off an individual from certain things. It, thus, implies a felt loss. It indicates a state of certain deficiencies experienced by the individual which relates to certain features of the environment that are absent or inadequate in certain degree which cause an impact on the functioning of the

individual. Thus, when one states of deprivation, the emphasis is on the relevant aspect of the environment which are deficient or wanted in some respects (Sinha, 1982). Nurcombe (1970) stated that deprivation refers specially to a disposition or loss of privileges, opportunities, material goods and the like which occur with reference to three interrelated sets of basic needs—physical, psychological and socio – cultural.

Altruism is a trait found in everybody. However, individuals differ with regard to altruism depending upon several factors. Social psychologists hold the view that altruism is indeed not inborn but a learned trait. Children can learn to be altruistic, friendly and self-controlled by modelling and socializing. Therefore, age is an important determinant of altruism across the life-span. It has been observed that children become more prosocial with age (Berndt, 1985; Chou, 1998; Collins & Getz, 1976; Eisenberg, 1982; Rai & Gupta, 1996; Sharma, 1996). In a recent study, Ojha and Pramanick (2010) found that with advancement of age altruism increases significantly. But there are also studies which do not reveal age related effects on altruistic behaviours (Green & Schneider, 1974; Lowe & Richley, 1973; Midlarsky & Hannah, 1985). Studies directly related to the effect of environmental deprivation on altruism are few and far between. Of course, there are some studies regarding the effect of certain indices of socio-economic status on altruism but their findings are inconsistent (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Liable, Cario & Roffaelli, 2000), although these studies had few participants as subjects. However, in one recent study in contrast to the popular belief that rich persons are more altruistic, Piff, Stancato, Cote, Mendoza Denton and Keltner (2012) found among California university students that wealthy persons were less likely to behave altruistically in comparison to poor. Social class and deprivation are not synonymous but related concepts. Social class covers three main determinants viz., income, occupation and education; while deprivation includes deficiency in the fulfilment of basic physiological, social and psychological needs. However, it is beyond doubt that demographic as well as social-cultural variables play important role in the development

of altruistic behaviour. (Karmakar & Ghosh, 2012; Kumari & Ojha, 2008).

Old age is a stage of life which is full of several deprivations and therefore altruism is likely to rise in the advanced age. If old age is associated with economic and social deprivations, the effect multiplies. This justifies taking into consideration the interactional effect of the two. Hence in the present investigation our objective was to see the independent as well as interactional effects of age and deprivation. The following hypotheses were formulated for verification:

1. Altruism will rise with advancement of age.
2. Altruism will rise with rise in deprivation level, and
3. Age and deprivation will interactively affect altruism significantly.

Method

Sample:

A sample of 480 working and retired employees of government and semi government organisations from three age groups (each including 180 subjects) viz. young (over 20 – 40 years), middle (over 40-60 years) and old (over 60 – 80 years) were administered Deprivation Scale. Subjects of each age group were then classified on the basis of their deprivation scores into three categories viz. high deprived (HD), medium deprived (MD) and low deprived (LD). Those who obtained scores on the scale above 75th percentile were termed as HD, those scoring below 25th percentile were treated as LD and those who received scores between 37.5th and 62.5th percentiles were labelled as MD. Subjects scoring between 25th and 32.5th and also between 50th and 62.5th percentile were excluded in order to have distinctive deprivation groups. Thus it was a bivariate classification by age and deprivation in which each of 9 cells contained 40 subjects. The final sample thus constituted only of 360 subjects.

Research Tools:

The following objective tests were used for the study. The first scale was used for the categorization of subjects with reference to

deprivation and the second test was used to measure altruism among them.

Deprivation Scale: The scale constructed by Ojha (2005) included 18 items relating to felt deficiency in the satisfaction of physical, social and psychological needs. Each item had five response categories which varied from item to item. The scores on the scale ranged between 18 and 90. The split-half and test-retest reliabilities (as reported by the test author) were 0.77 and 0.71 respectively.

Altruism Scale: The scale development by Ojha (2005) consisted of 20 items. In each item, a situation was depicted and three kinds of responses for each item were mentioned. The subject was required to imagine what a supposed person will do in that situation. The subject had to choose anyone response out of the three. If he chose the altruistic response, he was given a score of 2, if he chose the casual response he was assigned a score of 1 and if he ticked the egoistic response, he was given a score of zero. The responses to each item were varied randomly. The scores on the test ranged between 0 and 40. The split – half and test – retest reliabilities (as reported by test author) were 0.75 and 0.70 respectively.

Results

Our objective was to determine the independent effects of age and deprivation as well as their interaction on subject's altruism. In order to do this, the scores of the subjects on altruism were tabulated across three age and three deprivation levels and a two-way ANOVA was performed to see whether there were variations in altruism scores as a consequence of age, deprivation and their interaction.

The results of ANOVA revealed that there was significant effect of age on altruism [$F(2,351) = 21.42, p < 0.01$]. Significant effect of deprivation on altruism [$F(2,351) = 3.12, p < 0.05$] too was obvious, although not as intense as in case of age. However, the interactional effect of age and deprivation was insignificant [$F(2,351) = 0.43, p > 0.05$]. Hence it can be stated that variations in age and deprivation levels are followed by variation in altruism.

However, in order to know the direction of variation as consequence of the said variables means and SD scores by age, deprivation and their interactions were computed and intergroup differences were determined by Fisher's two tailed t-test.

Table 1. Means and SDs of Altruism score by age and deprivation and their interactions.

Age Group	Deprivation Group			All
	HD	MD	LD	
Old	M=23.92 SD=7.63	M=23.92 SD=6.91	M=23.35 SD=7.25	M=23.74 SD=7.23
Middle	M=22.36 SD=6.95	M=23.04 SD=7.30	M=19.07 SD=7.50	M=21.49 SD=7.25
Young	M=20.24 SD=7.15	M=18.93 SD=7.25	M=18.13 SD=6.85	M=19.10 SD=7.08
All	M=22.18 SD=7.24	M=21.96 SD=7.15	M=20.18 SD=6.80	X

It is obvious from Table 1 (last column), that the highest altruism score has been obtained by the old age group, followed by the second highest score of the middle age group and the lowest score of the young age group. All the three intergroup differences were found to be significant i.e. between old and middle ($t = 2.42, p < 0.05$) old and young ($t = 5.04, p < 0.01$) and middle and young ($t = 2.59, p < 0.01$) age groups. Thus, with increase in age, there occurs a significant increase in altruism and our first hypothesis gets confirmed.

By looking at the mean scores by deprivation levels, in the bottom row of Table 1, it is noted that the highest score has been recorded by the HD group followed by that of the MD group but the difference between the two groups was not significant ($t = 0.24, p > 0.05$). However, the LD group obtained the lowest score which was significantly different from those of MD ($t = 1.98, p < 0.05$) and HD ($t = 2.15, p < 0.05$) groups. Thus, our second hypothesis is also upheld.

The pattern of altruism score for respondents in different sub groups formed on the basis of interaction of age and deprivation remain almost the same. Hence, it makes obvious that there is little interaction effect. The computation of intergroup differences between pairs of subgroups, therefore, appeared an unnecessary

exercise. The insignificant and small F-value of interaction justifies our contention.

Discussion

The results have led us to the conclusion that with advancement in age, altruistic tendencies increase and consequently, the middle aged population is more altruistic than young aged, and the elderly are more altruistic than middle aged persons. A previous study by Rushton (1986) has lent support to our finding. Using four questionnaires to measure altruism such as empathy, nurturance, aggressiveness and assertiveness, he found that altruism increased over the age from 19 to 60 whereas aggression decreased and at each age level women had higher scores than men on altruism and lower scores on aggressiveness. Naidu (1980), in an Indian study, tried to see the effects of several factors including age and reported that older boys were more altruistic than younger boys. Some other studies referred earlier also support our findings. Ojha and Mishra (2009) found a high correlation between the altruism scores of parents and children which indicate that children of altruistic parents tend to be altruistic in future. This shows that role of learning through modelling is important in determination of altruism. Children learn to be altruistic, friendly and self-controlled by modelling and socialisation and this process goes through the advancement of age. As children mature cognitively they are able to take the perspective of other people and by adulthood they help others on the basis of empathic concern (Agrawala & Jain, 1993; Underwood & Moore, 1982)

The results have also revealed that altruism is related positively with deprivation i.e. as the deprivation increases altruism also increases. However, we may account for higher altruism among high deprived subjects of all ages. Poor people risk their lives to protect others because their life conditions are such that they are able to experience the miseries of others in comparison to privileged people. They have empathic concern with the suffering humanity. For example, Yinon (1979) conducted an experiment to demonstrate the effect of perceived deprivation of material and non-material rewards on helping behaviour

of Israeli boys aged 12 – 14 years. He wanted to see whether persons who constantly feel deprived help other people more than persons who do not feel deprived. It was found that subjects who considered themselves to be highly deprived helped others more than those who regarded themselves as not deprived.

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